



TRANSFORMING THE LAND

Wisconsin project turns a proposed nuclear plant site into an environmental gem

BY AIMIE L. MIMS, ARWP

The 4,400-acre Tyrone property in Wisconsin has seen a lot of changes since Xcel Energy acquired it in the 1970s.

The site was originally intended to be a nuclear power plant, but the plant was never built and the land remained vacant. After more than 30 years of public use and a lack of oversight, the land became a trash dumping site and ATV playground that caused damage to wetlands, trout streams, forested hillsides, agricultural crops and remnant ecosystems. A property inventory conducted in 2007 showed a total of roughly 230 unauthorized uses, including 96 deer stands, 43 off-road vehicle sites, 17 erosion sites and 57 trash sites.

The damage to the land became so extensive that it generated negative publicity from local media. Xcel Energy had also received numerous letters of concern from conservation groups and neighbors. Clearly, some intervention was needed.

Becoming Proactive in Land Management

To transform the misused land, Xcel Energy needed to create and implement a comprehensive plan that would maximize its interests, enhance community relations and showcase its ability to be a responsible land steward.

In 2007, Xcel Energy partnered with a number of groups to develop and implement active land management plans. These groups included the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf), Lower Chippewa River Alliance, Durand Sportsmen's Club, University of Wisconsin-Stout, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, farm tenants and neighboring landowners.

In 2008, following a detailed field inspection of the property, a crew worked to clean up the trash sites and posted signs that informed visitors that foot travel was welcome, but motorized vehicles and littering were not. However, cleaning up the property was just the beginning. Extensive site management and restoration actions were critical in order to become good stewards of the land and properly manage the company's asset. More importantly, these actions were mandatory if the company was going to restore the public's trust.

But following decades of neglect and the resulting devastation to the land and property, conservationists in the area who had once opposed the nuclear generation plant now had an understandable bias against Xcel Energy. They felt only more harm than good would come to this property, and changing the mindset of these environmental advocates was a daunting task. Xcel Energy needed to prove that it could live up to its tagline "Responsible by Nature," and this could only be accomplished through the company's actions.



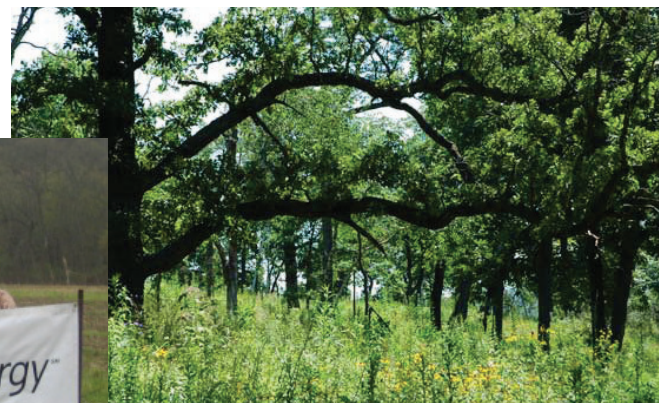
Xcel Energy employees and hundreds of community volunteers partnered with groups like the National Wild Turkey Federation to restore the once neglected land into a wildlife habitat and recreation area.

Local Resistance

Given the magnitude of the Tyrone Land Management project, in 2009 Xcel Energy hired industry veteran Matt McFarlane to lead the effort. Having been previously employed by the WDNR and U.S. Forest Service in wildlife management, Matt realized the property's potential. The Tyrone property, he foresaw, would be a significant display of balancing wildlife, conservation and recreational opportunities.

When beginning the prairie restoration on the property, Xcel Energy was met with opposition from tenant farmers who were opposed to converting the sandy fields into prairie or a forested recreation area. It was challenging to explain to these tenant farmers the importance of these wild and natural prairies relative to the low productivity of the sandy agricultural fields. To counter the resistance, employees worked closely with farm tenants who had leases for crop planting on hundreds of acres. They had to be convinced of the environmental benefits of converting the low-producing fields into wildlife habitat.

By implementing several successful restoration efforts, Xcel Energy was able to gain back the trust of both the tenant farmers and the advocate groups. The company gave them a voice in the restoration process, and working side-by-side, they breathed new life back to the land that had been all but destroyed. With assistance from conservation partners and nonprofit conservation organizations, Xcel Energy began turning this once neglected and abused property into one of Wisconsin's environmental gems.



More than 500 acres of prairie were transformed, including a 66-acre portion that was restored back to its original state as oak savannah.

Restoration Efforts

Once the trash and deer stands were cleaned up, the company added soil to the eroded areas, allowing revegetation to take place. Roughly 300 acres of non-productive, sandy fields were converted into red and white pine plantations, and more than 500 acres of prairie were restored. Additionally, public access points for canoeing, bird watching and hunting were established.

Historical records described the field as comprised of oak savanna back in the 1800s. Oak savanna habitats provide excellent conditions for bobolinks (a small blackbird), red-headed woodpeckers, turkeys and other wildlife. In 2011, Xcel Energy's restoration work was extended to bring a 66-acre portion of the property back to its original state as oak savanna. In conjunction with the 2011 Earth Day employee event, the company planted 1,200 white and bur oak trees. Despite unseasonably wet and cool weather, dozens of Wisconsin employee volunteers turned out for the planting. The following year, Xcel Energy employees and volunteers from the NWTF and WDNR celebrated Earth Day by planting more bur oak, white pine and fruiting shrubs in another section of land to serve as an educational demonstration site, showing residents how they could create and improve habitat for wild turkeys.

The company also completed work for a public canoe landing on the Chippewa River, adjacent to a cleared scenic overlook on the Tyrone property. In the summer of 2012, the company hosted the Natural Resources Conservation Service's annual

Landowner Day, where speakers educated farmers on wildlife-related programs. In addition, Xcel Energy and the NWTF honored veterans who returned from combat with disabilities with a special disabled veteran's deer hunt event.

The land now offers a plethora of stunning sights and provides a much-needed variety of essential habitat protection for amphibians, reptiles and mammals alike. Each of these prairie habitats has its own ecological niche and is full of plant and wildlife diversity. These restorations will ultimately recreate large tracts of declining grassy habitat that is essential for grassland nesting birds and other wildlife that once thrived in western Wisconsin before human settlement.

An Integrated Plan

In going so far above and beyond the land improvements required, Xcel Energy was able to live up to its motto. The company has restored trust with neighbors and conservation groups, while providing a breathtaking habitat for wildlife and recreational users.

In achieving financial support for this major land management effort, Xcel Energy's management staff and Siting and Land Rights Department all played a major role. The company financially supported the initial investment to conduct a property inventory and cleanup in 2007 and 2008. Since that time, the company has established a positive working relationship with the WDNR and NWTF, and jointly wrote and applied for state and federal grants to implement land management improvements. The project continues to receive



In addition to providing a habitat for wildlife, public access points were established for recreational users to enjoy canoeing, bird watching and hunting.

annual financial support from Xcel Energy. In 2011, Xcel Energy was awarded with a Wisconsin state grant of \$50,000 to help support rehabilitation efforts on the Tyrone property.

Since the implementation of the asset management plan, there have been a number of substantial benefits to the company, community and environment. In the past three years, the effort has converted hundreds of acres of sandy, non-productive agricultural fields into a variety of prairie habitats, including oak savannas, floodplain savannas, dry sand prairies, sand barrens and jack pine barrens. Prairie restoration, tree planting and grassland bird surveys are just a few of the ongoing land management practices. Conducting prescribed burning, timber harvesting and brush removal is another land management benefit, converting 300 acres of non-productive sandy fields into red and white pine plantations. A net plantation increase of 600 acres is projected by 2015. The prairie restoration areas have also encouraged further research opportunities, enabling the study of before/after plant and bird survey comparisons.

Conservationist of the Year

Enhancing and restoring an almost seven-square mile property that possesses virtually every kind of open and forested type of habitat in existence is something that very few right of way projects can boast. This project developed from a need to transform Xcel Energy's once neglected assets into a natural habitat. Those involved in the project saw the potential the property had to give back to the community and have gone above and beyond expectations to create a magnificent environment. Many Xcel Energy employees and hundreds of community volunteers have had a hand in the success of these efforts. The company is starting to see positive results and hopes to continue to bring ecological balance back to this area for the wildlife and the people who enjoy it.

The Lower Chippewa River Alliance, once a vocal critic of the proposed nuclear power plant in the 1970s, selected Xcel Energy for the prestigious 2012 Land Conservationists of the Year award for its environmental leadership, honoring the company for its exceptional cleanup, restoration and management of the Tyrone property.



Accepting the 2012 Land Conservationists of the Year Award were, from left, Northern States Power-Wisconsin President and CEO Mark Stoering, retired President and CEO Mike Swenson, Xcel Energy's Siting and Land Rights Manager Pam Rasmussen and Permitting Analyst Matt McFarlane.

In accepting the award, Xcel Energy President and CEO of Northern States Power-Wisconsin Mark Stoering said, "It is truly amazing to learn the history of this property and to see the significant changes that have taken place during the last few years. Clearly, strong partnerships and hard work are bringing balance back to this area."

The history and evolution of this site has made this a unique and remarkable project. From a planned nuclear plant to an ATV playground and trash dumpsite, the company successfully converted the damaged land into 4,400 acres of restored natural habitat and rare prairie. Not only does this land showcase an environment that is rarely seen, it gives back to the community by providing public natural space for canoeing, bird watching, hunting and public education. This once controversial and neglected parcel of land is now one of Xcel Energy's most prized environmental projects.

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